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INTERIOR SECRETARY SIGNS FIRST-OF-ITS-KIND SPECIES HABITAT AND OPEN SPACE CONSERVATION PLAN IN ORANGE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

The serene and wildlife-rich coastal sagebrush landscape of Orange County, California, will be protected from development under a landmark conservation plan signed today by Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt. The plan, developed by local citizens, businesses and governments, will protect over 40 native Californian species threatened by destruction of habitat and increased urban sprawl. The Orange County Central and Coastal Natural Communities Conservation Plan (NCCP) is the first-of-its-kind partnership between federal, state and county governments, municipalities, land developers and other property owners sharing a common interest in protecting open space.

"Today's historic agreement is an example of President Clinton delivering on his promise to make the Endangered Species Act work better," Secretary Babbitt said. "By giving local citizens the power to develop conservation plans, with technical and financial assistance from the state and the federal government, we have a good shot at long-term success. The days of the federal government directing every detail of endangered species planning from Washington, DC, are over. This Orange County plan will serve as a model for the nation, pointing the way to protect wildlife and conserve open space in areas of increasing urban pressure. It is a real triumph of communities over conflict."

The NCCP creates about 38,000 acres in Nature Reserve, located three areas spanning the coastal foothills and the foothills of the Santa Ana Mountains. In all, about 40 at-risk species of wildlife and plants will receive protection at the same level as the six species already listed under the Endangered Species Act. By shifting the emphasis on protecting species to a multi-species habitat conservation approach, the Department of the Interior is able to offer participating landowners long-range certainty about the future development of their land.

"This is a win-win situation for both economic certainty and species conservation," Babbitt continued. "We will be able to protect these at-risk species before it becomes necessary to add them to the Endangered Species list, and private and public landowners can develop plans for the future of their properties with certainty. At the same time, Orange County residents now and in the future have assurances that the dramatic coastal vistas, the recreational opportunities and the quality of life that drew them to Orange County in the first place will not be eroded away by urban expansion."

Babbitt explained that representatives from the California Resources Agency and from The Irvine Company, a large land developer in Orange County, had met with him early in 1993 to express an interest in coordinating a new state law empowering counties and cities to designate open space habitat for protection of endangered species. "This proved to be a perfect opportunity to demonstrate this Administration's belief that the Endangered Species Act could be used to avoid the kind of train-wrecks created by previous administrations in the Pacific Northwest."

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Within weeks of that 1993 meeting, Babbitt invoked the power of rarely-used provisions (Sections 10(a) and 4(d) of ESA) within the Act to allow the State of California to take the lead in protecting the threatened California gnatcatcher. This action triggered a consensus process in Orange County involving all stakeholders, including local environmentalists, in the planning process. The Department of the Interior has since used regulatory flexibility in the 4(d) Rule to approve more than 140 Habitat Conservation Plans around the country, and more than 330 additional plans are currently in the development process. In southern California, the planning process is underway to protect coastal and sage scrub habitat in five counties: San Diego, Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino. The eventual outcome will mean that 6000 square miles between San Diego and Los Angeles will have locally-planned open space reserves, set aside for enjoyment and recreation as well as habitat protection for wildlife and plants.

"This Administration has made a series of administrative changes that make it easier for local citizens to protect their open spaces and use their land while still providing essential habitat protection for a multitude of wildlife and plant species," Babbitt said. "These conservation plans are voluntary for private landowners, and offer common-sense solutions and long-term certainty. This is the way we will be doing business in the future, and we are already seeing results on the ground from Washington state to the Everglades."

In the case of Orange County, this is the first of three regions of the county to complete the NCCP process. The Irvine Company is the largest private landowner in the Central & Coastal Plan, and is contributing 21,000 acres for a large part of the open space set aside as Nature Reserve. Two portions of the Nature Reserve, located near Newport Beach and Irvine, will be inter-connected by greenways, hiking paths and mountain ridges, creating recreational opportunities for an area that dwarfs San Francisco's Golden Gate Park or Manhattan's Central Park.

"I hope that Congress takes notice of these accomplishments in southern California," Babbitt said. "During more than three years of grass-roots planning in Orange County, Congress has been debating and holding hearings and making impassioned speeches about the Endangered Species Act, but nothing has been passed. They need to realize that these NCCPs are good for at-risk and endangered wildlife species, but great for human species. There is certainty now for growth and development of a dynamic region, and there is certainty that the grandchildren of those signing this agreement today will have access to the majestic landscape that has drawn so many to select these communities as their home."

Secretary Babbitt will be joined at the signing by Douglas Wheeler, Secretary of the California Resources Agency; Roger Stanton, Chairman of the Orange County Board of Supervisors; Donald Bren, Chairman, and Monica Florian, Senior Vice President for Corporate Affairs, of The Irvine Company.

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A short radio actuality of Secretary Babbitt discussing the Orange County NCCP is available by calling 800-521-3370, or 202-208-4777 in the DC metro area.